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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a ten-week elective course for high school seniors entitled "Literature and Women's Liberation." The purposes of the course were (1) to introduce students to some of the classic fictional, nonfictional, poetic, and dramatic statements concerning the role of women, as well as to quite a few recent commentaries on this theme; and (2) to raise the students' consciousness concerning the very real problems that have confronted women throughout their struggle for independence and identity. Readings included "Up Against the Wall, Mother: On Women's Liberation," "Main Street," poems by Sylvia Plath, Marge Piercy, and other poets, "Miss Julie," and "The Doll's House." In addition, materials from newspapers, magazines, photographs, and advertisements were used. The class began with an introduction to the great authors of the Western literary tradition (who hated women) and moved toward a study of traditional stereotypes of women in contemporary society. Mass media and guest speakers added variety to the lessons. Student response to the class was enthusiastic. (HOD)

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FROM PANDORA TO NORA: LITERATURE AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

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A dedicated feminist seeking an arena in which to do battle with the forces of male chauvirism need look no farther than the traditional high school English classroom. Not only will she find proof that hers is the weaker sex as far as the grammar books are concerned; she will be even more dismayed to discover that the literature program is also a man's world. Shakespeare, that perennial object of English teachers' adoration, is indubitably male, as are the protagonists of the tragedies that constitute the staples of the English curriculum: Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and Hamlet. Ah, yes, one might respond, but what of those other traditional classroom favorites, Romeo and Juliet and The Merchant of Venice? Juliet, you may recall, kills herself for love, and Portia, another prisoner of love (remember those caskets?), plays games and masquerades to induce her Bassanio to prove his adoration -- and achieves her stunning courtroom triumph only when dressed as a man. What role models are these, one wonders, for impressionable young women?

Turning from Shakespeare (and well we might!), let us examine the systematic discrimination against women practiced elsewhere in the English curriculum. What of our own literature? A glance at the table of contents of The Cycle of American Literature, Robert E. Spiller's definitive study of major American authors, reveals these names: Edwards, Franklin, Jefferson, Irving, Bryant, Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Howells, Twain, Dickinson, James, Adams, Norris, Robinson, Dreiser, Frost,

O'Neill, Hemingway, Eliot, and Faulkner -- all classroom idols: all but one, men. Are there no women authors worthy of study in a high school class in American literature? Well, there's always Anne Bradstreet, the quintessential housewife; Amy Lowell, best known by students for her poem about an engaged woman whose fiance's death ends her life in the outside world; and let's not forget Emily Dickinson, who never ventured into the outside world at all. English literature seems equally unpromising: from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, women are portrayed as virtuous virgins, torrid temptresses, faithful retainers (should we say "retainesses"?), or simply nonexistent. There is, of course, one woman novelist whose work was studied, or should we say endured, by untold generations of English students. But who would ever have known she was female? ...for her name was George.

It was considerations such as these, as well as my own growing interest in women's studies and the role of women in our society, that led me, in the fall of 1972, to devise a ten-week elective course for Friends Select seniors entitled "Literature and Women's Liberation." I was pleased to see fourteen students -- three men and eleven women -- select this as their English course for the winter trimester. Not only would the course be unquestionably relevant -- but, through a "liberated" view of women in literature, I hoped that several things would happen. The men would realize that the concerns of their female classmates had to be taken seriously. The women would realize that anatomy is not destiny, that their societal roles are not predetermined, but limitless -- and that, in the words of Benjamin Braddock in The Graduate, it might be a very desirable thing to be "uncertain about their future."

And because I wished the movement of the course to be that of negative to positive, of stereotype to reality, I organized its content around those two touchstones of feminine experience: Pandora, who opened the door for the entrance of evil into the world; and Nora, who slammed a door -- but who, in slamming it, opened the door for women's self-fulfillment.

The next order of business was to select some readings for the course; this was, after all, a course in literature as well as women's liberation. Furthermore, I had no intention of restricting our readings to contemporary polemic, but wished instead to expose the class to a wide range of literature from all periods and locales. My final choices, then, were as follows:

1. As our major text: the enchantingly titled Up Against the Wall, Mother: On Women's Liberation, edited by Elsie Adams and Mary Louise Briscoe of the English Department, Wisconsin State University at Whitewater, and published by the Glencoe Press (Macmillan). Divided into four sections -- "The Traditional View of Women," "The Nature of Woman," "Adjustment for Survival," and "Toward Freedom" -- this excellent anthology combines articles of contemporary concern with fictional, poetic, and dramatic excerpts, ranging from Aristophanes and the Bible to Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing, that exemplify the issues raised in the articles.

2. Novel: Sinclair Lewis' Main Street, whose protagonist, Carol Kennecott, so well typifies the "feminine mystique" and its failures.

Poetry: selections from the anthology, supplemented by dittoed poems by Sylvia Plath, Marge Piercy, et al.

Drama: Strindberg's Miss Julie, the work of an avowed misogynist; and Ibsen's A Doll's House, the final piece of literature studied in the course and still the Bible of women's liberation.

On the first day of class, I presented the syllabus for "Literature and Women's Liberation," in which I introduced the course as follows:

> The purpose of this English course is twofold: (1) to introduce you to some of the classic fictional, non-fictional, poetic and dramatic statements concerning the role of women, as well as quite a few recent and current commentaries on this theme; (2) to raise your consciousness concerning the very real problems that have confronted women throughout their struggle for independence and identity.
>
> As the subject matter of our course is controversial, controversy will be welcomed in the classroom. As you read the various material that will be assigned, be sure to note your reactions, and do not hesitate to voice your opinions, objections, challenges, etc. during our class discussions.

In addition, I urged the class that, since consciousness-raising was everyone's business, they be on the lookout for materials that presented women either positively or negatively. These materials could be found in newspaper and magazine articles; works of art, including photographs; advertisements in all the media; and quotations -- famous and infamous. Any of these, when found, should be brought to class and posted on the bulletin board to serve as the subject matter for discussion. This aspect of the course was seized upon immediately and enthusiastically by my students, who delighted daily in posting the latest advance -- or outrage.

On the second day, the class was introduced to the startling

fact that the great authors in our Western literary tradition all hated women. For background, we began with the Pandora myth and the account of the Creation in Genesis, both of which blame women for the world's evils. Then we turned to the great authors to see how they viewed the "unfair" sex. What did we find? Homer, in the Iliad, shows women only as spoils of battle; in the Odyssey, his feminine ideal is the superbly faithful Penelope, who stays at home for twenty years while husband Ulysses acts out every James-Bonded male fantasy during and after the Trojan War. Shakespeare, whose views have already been noted, tells us in his most famous play, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" Chaucer's sole female characters on that well-known pilgrimage to Canterbury are the overly sentimental Prioress and that ultimate sex object, the five-times-married Wife of Bath! And what of Milton, third in the pantheon of great English authors? He reminds us, in Paradise Lost, that Adam and Eve were not created equal:

> For contemplation he and valour formed,
> For softness she and sweet attentive grace;
> He for God only, she for God in him. (IV, 296-98)

Furthermore, Milton's Eve is a narcissistic wanton, easy prey for Satan's blandishments, and a fatal mate for Adam, who eats the apple only because he -- poor noble and lovesick male -- cannot bear to have her endure God's punishment alone.

After this eye-opening session, we began our study of the traditional stereotypes of women. Readings from Up Against the Wall, Mother on "The Second Sex" (Genesis, Leviticus, traditional Catholic teachings, and Freud), "Woman-as-Object" (Elizabethan love sonnets and Playboy bunnies), "Woman-as-Enemy" (D. H. Lawrence, Lysistrata, and the S.C.U.M. Manifesto), and "The Eternal Feminine" (Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Robert Graves, and Jean Toomer) all revealed to

the students what men, through the ages, have thought of women. We speculated as to the origins of such stereotypes -- ancient social organizations, religious rites, primitive taboos and fears of the "Other" -- and noted the nearly universal condemnation of women found in the major religions.

But are these stereotypes operational today? To determine if women are still considered "the second sex," we turned our attention to that unerring arbiter of contemporary attitudes: Madison Avenue. And we found that while the Virginia Slims people insist, "You've come a long way, baby," an examination of current advertising indicates otherwise. There are the blatant ones: the airline that uses photographs of sensuous stewardesses to exhort its (presumably male) clientele to "Fly me," the perfumer who suggests, "Want him to be more of a man? Try being more of a woman," and the well-known energy booster which rewards its faithful (undoubtedly female) imbibers with the conjugal accolade, "I think I'll keep her." But there are the subtle ones, as well: the cutlery concern which admonishes, "Don't ruin her cooking with your carving," the clothing manufacturer who consoles his college-girl customers with, "You'll look so good in these duds that it'll be perfectly okay if you don't understand football," and the mail-order novelties catalogue that offers personalized memo pads in two styles: his -- "From the desk of _____," and hers -- "A short note from _____." After being exposed to a few of these, the students were asked to bring in additional advertisements in which women were stereotyped as "the second sex" -- dependent, inferior, passive, and the like. Then, a few days later, they wrote papers analyzing, in terms of the readings and issues discussed in class, an advertisement that

showed some form of biased or stereotyped thinking about women. The assignment not only proved immensely enjoyable, affording the class limitless opportunities for sarcasm and righteous indignation, but also served as a barometer to test how high their consciousnesses had been raised.

By now, word of the "radical" English course was getting around -- ours is a small school, and news travels fast -- and students with free periods were beginning to sit in on our discussions. To broaden the course's appeal, I posted a dozen or so advertisements on a bulletin board, numbered them, suggested that the viewer decide which of them were guilty of showing stereotyped views of women, and captioned the display "Male Chauvinism Test." It was amazing to see how many students from ninth through twelfth grade (and faculty!) responded to the challenge of "See how liberated you are!" Imagine their dismay when they learned that only one of the advertisements, a Dewar's Profile, would not have insulted a liberated woman. After this display, school-wide interest in the course rose rapidly, as did the number of auditors.

Their consciousnesses fully raised, and, in some cases, their angers roused, the members of the class were now ready to tackle the major works of literature on the syllabus. We began rather unpleasantly with Strindberg's Miss Julie, a tragedy in which the title character, a femme fatale in Act I, is seduced by a servant and immediately is transformed into a helpless, submissive female who finally takes her lover's advice and commits suicide. The playwright's prejudice against Julie, whom he calls in his Preface a "half-woman" and a "man-hater" who deserves her fate, was evident to the class, which regarded the play as a classic case study in misogyny.

A selection from The Feminine Mystique and a Doris Lessing short story, "To Room 19," prepared us for our next unit of study, "The Marriage Trap," and its major work, Main Street. Here the reaction of the class was most interesting. As Lewis was obviously satirizing the youthful, idealistic, and meddling Carol Kennecott as well as lampooning Gopher Prairie, the smug and ugly small Midwestern town of which she was an unwilling inhabitant, many of the students could not sympathize with Carol. They felt she was too hypocritical, too naive, or simply too immature to be considered a woman engaged in a serious struggle for self-understanding. Yet it was easy to see in Carol all the symptoms of Betty Friedan's "problem that has no name," and Carol's attempts to create a separate identity for herself, her plea for a room of her own, and her exodus to Washington all struck responsive chords.

Our final piece of literature was A Doll's House. Here, the Caedmon recording, with Claire Bloom as Nora, allowed the play to speak for itself both literally and figuratively. Articles from the anthology such as Matina Horner's "Fail, Bright Women" gave us additional perspectives from which to view Nora's entrapment and deceptions. But the play itself, with its central metaphor of the masquerade, is as rich a source of attitudes and discussion as a teacher could desire. Following a week and a half of listening to and discussing the play, we moved easily to consideration of alternatives to traditional marriage, including those suggested by Alvin Toffler in Future Shock, as well as postulating some guidelines for a truly equal marriage.

Throughout the course, the mass media played an important role.

Not only did we turn to television for its advertising; we also watched the situation comedies, such as All in the Family, Maude, and The Mary Tyler Moore Show, to examine the role models they offer to American women. During the ten weeks, several specials, including the Joseph Papp production of Much Ado About Nothing and the movies Diary of a Mad Housewife and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, also appeared on television, adding variety to assignments and discussions. The frequent reading aloud by students, at the beginning of class, of a newspaper clipping or magazine article on, for example, paternity leave for "liberated" fathers or the progress of the Equal Rights Amendment added contemporary relevance and gave the students an even greater opportunity to participate. And a day spent listening to songs such as "I Enjoy Being a Girl" and "Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Man" indicated that Broadway is no more liberated than Hollywood.

Another source of variety in the course proved to be guest speakers. People from within the school, such as fellow faculty members, administrators, or librarians; or from outside, such as mothers of students, visiting celebrities whom a student just happens to know, or representatives of organizations such as the National Organization for Women, perform vital functions in a course of this type. They supply points of view to supplement those found in the literature, provide a standard by which these views may be judged, serve as living role models (of prime importance to the women in the class!), and, of course, constitute a temporary respite for (and from) the teacher. In our course, we were fortunate to have, from within the school, the head of the language department, who gave a lecture on Tolstoy's views of marriage as seen in The Kreutzer Sonata, and the lower school librarian, who spoke to us

about sex-role stereotyping in children's literature. Outside speakers included Lynn Scheffey, Chairman of the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women, who explained her work to us, and Judge Lisa Richette, who spoke on "Women and the Law."

Throughout the course, my role was that of an admittedly biased exponent of women's liberation; often, as I listened to students debate the issues and each other, or interjected views of my own, I wondered whether my efforts would be better classified as propaganda than as education. But I was continually reassured by the class that such was not the case. The enthusiasm and openness that characterized our discussions -- discussions which often continued in the hall well into the next period -- were unparalleled in my eleven years of teaching. Not only did the students become aware of discrimination and stereotyping in literature; they also found these in their own experience, shared their discoveries, and, in some instances, began to question long-held values and future plans.

On the final day of the course, I asked for written evaluations, and I can think of no better way to conclude than to have the students speak for themselves. Paul had this to say:

> The most important goal for a teacher is to get a message, or a number of messages, across to her or his students. I feel that you have gotten many people to think about women's liberation. Also, some people in the class have now changed their "evil ways" of thinking and acting about women.
>
> Being one of only three boys in a class with about a dozen females under any circumstance is an interesting experience, but when the class is about women's liberation every class becomes a happening. There was barely a day in which I was not looking forward to class (for me that is amazing), mostly because of the exciting discussions that were sure to arise.

Vonnie, a quiet person, responded:

Basically, I entered this course with the same opinions that I have now. The difference is that now I have a background for my opinions and a bunch of sound arguments that I can use to prove my points to anyone who challenges me (or vice versa!). Thus, I really feel that this course has greatly broadened my knowledge in the field of women -- not only women's liberation; but of the need for human liberation in this society. This is one of the only courses I have ever taken that doesn't only prepare one for college by the simple fact that, "Well, yes, I've read Sinclair Lewis, Henrik Ibsen and Strindberg, too." It has given me more than that. -- I feel it has helped me in everyday life.

And Jo has the last word:

I think it is essential for this course to remain at Friends Select and be instituted elsewhere. How else are young women and men going to get introduced to a movement which in preaching women's liberation is actually preaching men's? A lot of interest has been aroused throughout the school by this course. It seems (unfortunately) from what I see, Women's Liberation is a novelty type of thing around school, but when the men and women (it is significant that before this class I would have said boys and girls) of F.S.S. understand, as I think I now do, that it's more than just a fad, to take interest in Liberation, they will seriously ask themselves questions which may prove to make their futures happy and successful. This is an inspiring kind of course and the candle it has lit in me must be lit in others.

-- to which, as their teacher, I can only say, "A-<u>wo</u>men!"